



QUOTA REFORM PROTESTS

Student protestors share their experiences

CAMPUS MAGAZINE CORRESPONDENTS

Since mid-July, the otherwise peaceful Quota Reform Movement took an unfortunate turn as it got violent. We spoke to students from different public and private universities who participated in the protests and asked about their personal experiences as well as their opinions regarding the newly reformed quota system.

Sanjana*, 4th-year student, Dhaka University (DU)

The government still chose to allot the highest percentage of quotas to the children of freedom fighters. On what basis was one percent for indigenous people and one percent for the disabled and third gender given? Even the protestors didn't ask for so little for those minority groups. The complete abolishment of female quotas will have far-reaching impacts. We got what we wanted, but like 2018, the government once again seems to have skipped making a genuinely well-researched policy that benefits the people. This new quota system feels empty after the deaths of so many.

Anisha*, 4th-year student, DU

On July 15, I was running from the brick chunks being hurled at the students by goons in helmets at DU. I was completely taken aback because we were protesting peacefully. I saw students getting beaten with bamboo

sticks, and I was lucky to be fast enough to get away. What worsened my pain was the silence from the teachers about the attacks on the student. They did not even visit the students at the hospitals after so many days. If I am not safe on my campus, whose fault is that? Now, the 93 percent feels like a consolation prize, which came at a cost that is unimaginable.

Emon*, 4th-year student, DU

I initially wanted to go to Shahid Minar on July 16 because the activities of the day were supposed to be held there. I had to go there through Science Lab, but armed goons in helmets were occupying the area in front of Dhaka College and Nilkhet intersection. There were students of DU, Dhaka College, City College, and Ideal College, among others. The goons were throwing brick chunks at the students from the rooftop of the Teachers Training College to prevent the students from moving forward. When they ran out of bricks to hurl at students, the students began to move forward. The students chased the goons and the goons chased them back. After some time, the goons again started to hurl brick chunks at the students. The students were badly injured; some were bleeding profusely, but they didn't leave. There was a rumour circulating that there had been a death during the protest, but I was not there to see it. Upon returning home, I verified it, and it turned out to be true. The body

was found in a pool of blood near Dhaka College.

Irfan*, 4th-year student, DU

After the absentee funeral on July 17, the students were coming towards Raju Memorial Sculpture in a procession with coffins around 4:30 PM. Just then, law enforcement personnel started firing teargas and sound grenades. I observed one of them hurling teargas and clapping his hands, indicating that if the students were capable of beating them, they were welcome to do so. The students wanted to resist the actions of the law enforcers by climbing the walls of the International Language Institute and coming from the side of the library. But they used tear gas and sound grenades to disperse the students. The entire campus smelled of tear gas. Around 5 PM, the students came out of Hallpara (hall areas). Some journalists and a teacher were evacuating the students to safety. They were being removed from their campus against their will. Many had tears in their eyes. Anger and helplessness were all on their faces. As a student of DU, I could not contain my emotions at that moment. I cried.

Labeeb Zaman, 3rd-year student, Institute of Business Administration (IBA-DU)

I think the new quota system is a rash attempt by the government to curb the momentum of the movement. The exclusion of the female quota is appalling. Many

protestors are sceptical that this will all amount to nothing, and rightly so, given the government's previous attempts to abolish it and then reinstate it again. After protesting for so long and been beaten with sticks and even shot at, there is no way this is a valid response to our protests. This movement was also against long standing corruption and domination of political groups in public university campuses that disrupted a healthy academic environment. The high-handed tactics used by said parties to muzzle the voice of protestors are why they called for a ban on partisan politics on campus.

Yamin*, 1st-year student, BRAC University (BRACU)

All throughout the morning and afternoon of July 18, we were surrounded from both sides of the main entrance by law enforcement personnel and goons that accompanied them. They targeted the students and fired rubber bullets, sound grenades, and tear gas. Panicking, we all went back into the campus and locked the main gate. But the law enforcement personnel did not stop, they kept firing inside our campus. Many of us had to be rushed to the on-campus medical centre and soon, it became overcrowded. This went on until 12 PM, when more students from various other institutions joined in. They stood outside where the law enforcement, alongside countless other goons, attacked everyone. I got hit by two rubber bullets, and there was one student who was shot as he was

trying to enter university. Afterwards, I saw his dead body myself.

Riya*, 3rd-year student, BRACU

By the time I arrived at BRACU on July 18, there was already a human chain allowing only students to enter the university. Law enforcement personnel surrounded us, and we were peacefully protesting when a tear shell was thrown at us. A girl fell right in front of me so I had to help her up and take her to the medical centre. By the time I was there, I even heard news of a university guard being attacked and getting tear gas in his eyes. We scrambled around for toothpaste or other remedies that I brought for the people outside. This is when I saw tear shells inside the campus. We collected them to photograph for evidence and they were still hot to the touch. Afterwards, when I returned to the medical centre, I saw a student who was shot in the eye. Another had a rubber bullet lodged in his ear. We were even running out of oxygen supply to help the wounded. Many of the students had bullet wounds everywhere.

Foyzal*, 4th-year student, North South University (NSU)

On July 18, I marched from Bashundhara Gate all the way to Badda in the blazing heat surrounded by familiar faces. Some were handing out water and saline, trying to make sure we didn't have a heat stroke in the middle

of everything. By the time we arrived near Badda link road, I saw a person being carried away on a rickshaw. Students nearby said he was a student from Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), and that he was in a critical condition. All I remember was that he had an open wound near his stomach, probably from a bullet. Afterwards, everything was a blur, the charge of the law enforcers and the helmeted attackers caused us all to scramble. Then came the tear gas, burning my eyes and throat. I lost my group by then, but there were people on both ends of the road. On one side, there were the wounded, on the other was the group directly facing the law enforcement down. From that point, even though the protestors did manage to close in on BRACU, there were far too many wounded among us.

The testimonies collected and presented represent only a fraction of the grim reality people in the country are currently facing. The big question, then, is what is to come of this. Where do we go from this wanton violence?

**Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the students.*

Reference:

The Daily Star (July 16, 2024). *Man dies at DMCH after being found in pool of blood near Dhaka College.*

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN